

Greenbacks promote green Earth

Sale of credits helps subsidize renewable energy projects

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Protecting the Earth is now a possibility for everyday citizens.

Programs such as Rocky Mountain Power's Blue Sky and Questar's Thermwise continue to grow. They both ask customers to pay greenbacks for a greener Earth.

Blue Sky was launched in 2000 and currently has 21,500 Utah individuals and businesses participating.

"It is a very easy way for businesses and everyday people to actively make a difference," said Sara Baldwin, community programs coordinator for Utah Clean Air. "It helps create jobs, drives economic development, offsets global warming pollution, improves air quality and improves energy security."

Blue Sky participants purchase renewable energy blocks of 100 kilowatt-hours that cost \$1.95 each. The average Utah household uses from 700 to 800 kilowatt-hours per month, according to Rocky Mountain Power. Most of the money used to purchase the energy blocks goes to the production of renewable energy sources. The energy bought does not go directly to the buildings of the block buyers, but rather to the production of renewable energy that goes onto the general electrical grid.

"Those funds are used primarily to purchase wind energy from Western wind farms to add to the electrical system," said Jeff Hymas, Rocky Mountain Power spokesman. "The wind energy goes onto the grid to offset the impact of other types of nonrenewable electrical generation."

Nonrenewable energy sources include coal, natural gas and oil. A pie chart shows that 95 percent of Utah's electricity comes from coal, according to Baldwin.

"By investing in more renewable energy in the region and actively driving renewable energy development, Utahns are helping make that pie more clean and inexhaustible," said Baldwin.

Some participants don't understand that the Blue Sky program's funds do not blow solely into wind energy. The program's administration receives 13 percent, while 24 percent goes to customer outreach and education. The remaining 63 percent flows into the renewable energy projects. The program is regulated by the Utah Public Service Commission, ensuring that every dollar is accounted for.

"The company doesn't benefit from the program," said Hymas. "The growth in customer participation is a testimony that the program is having great success and that Blue Sky dollars are being managed effectively."

Andy Beerman, owner/operator of Park City Treasure Mountain Inn, buys enough energy blocks from Blue Sky to offset about 30 percent of his overall electricity consumption. Despite the large sums of money pouring from his account and into theirs, Beerman receives "no particular report" regarding where the money was spent.

"They give you a general idea," said Beerman. "It's basically going to subsidize the wind farms."

Even without specific accounting, Beerman still supports Blue Sky, which powers not only much of his hotel and condominium holdings, but both of his private homes as well.

"As owners, it makes us feel good, it adds personality to our business, and it makes our guests feel good," Beerman said. "Coal and oil are doing all kinds of damage to the environment. Wind power is a great alternative."

The government also has shown its support for the program. In early June, Gov. Jon M. Huntsman bought enough renewable energy blocks from Blue Sky to offset the power running into his mansion. He also has challenged the Blue Ribbon Advisory Council on Climate Change to create an energy portfolio that would increase energy efficiency in Utah by 2015.

The mayors of Salt Lake City, Salt Lake County and Moab have all made special efforts to go green as well. The Environmental Protection Agency selected Moab as the first Green Power Community for its clean-energy efforts.

"This was a good opportunity to promote renewables and lead by example," Moab Mayor Dave Sakrison said of his involvement in the Blue Sky program. "It has raised the environmental consciousness of this community. (Currently) 15 percent of the community participates in Blue Sky."

Sakrison doesn't limit his environmental commitment to the Blue Sky program. He also has worked to construct and reconstruct public buildings to be more environmentally friendly. He recently had the City Hall converted, using everything from recycled carpeting to a geothermal heating and cooling system to low-flush toilets.

"The first year, we budgeted for heating and cooling and gave it \$50,000," said Sakrison. "It ended up being \$27,000."

Moab recently took down 10 of its stadium lights at four baseball diamonds and left 11 up. The city also is planning a recreation center replacement that will include solar panels to heat water. The Moab Arts and Recreation Center also plans to put up solar panels, which will take down current energy use by 21 percent.

While customers replacing appliances in their homes with more energy-efficient replacements will pay more up front, they may save in the long haul.

"A 70 to 90 percent efficient furnace (standard homes have furnaces that are 65 to 75 percent efficient) saves you \$121 a year," said Questar spokesman Darren Shepherd. "If the gas rate stayed the same, that's over \$2,000 in savings over 20 years."

Under Questar's leadership, a program called Thermwise recently kicked off. Refundable audits are offered to Questar customers, as are rebates for the purchase of energy-efficient appliances.

"(Thermwise) is a campaign to brand this idea of conservation with our customers," said Shepherd. "We should use natural resources as wisely as possible. If we use less, we will enjoy it more."

Blue Sky and Thermwise both strive to keep the skies blue and the grass green, and they are not alone. A group called Utah Moms for Clean Air recently organized, as did Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment.

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